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C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENNA 000572

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARN, NEA/IPA, EUR/ERA AND EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD TO VISIT VIENNA MARCH 15

REF: STATE 27178

Classified By: Ambassador W.L. Lyons Brown. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) EconPol Counselor and Pol Unit Chief met Austrian MFA A/S-equivalent for the Middle East and Africa Ralph Scheide on February 28. In the course of a general discussion on Middle East issues, we made reftel points and raised concerns about President Bashir al-Assad's planned visit to Austria. Scheide confirmed that the GoA is expecting Assad on March 15. He conceded that the timing of the visit -- which was on the agenda for several years -- was turning out not to be the best.

12. (C) Based on reftel, we urged Austria to use the Assad visit as an opportunity to reinforce the international community's message to Syria. It was important that the U.S., the EU and other like-minded countries speak with one voice. Assad's visit should not come off as "business as usual," but must make clear to Assad that we all expect Syria to comply -- immediately -- with UNSCR 1559 and to cease its interference in Lebanon.

13. (C) Scheide confided that the new Israeli Ambassador, Danean Ashbel, had also spoken to him to express concern about Assad's visit. Scheide said he would convey our concerns to the Foreign Minister.

14. (C) At the same time as the meeting, Ambassador Brown received a telephone call from new French Ambassador Pierre Viaux asking whether the U.S. was planning to protest the Assad visit to the Austrian government. Viaux said he had no instructions to engage with the Austrians on Assad, but he had concerns about the visit. Ambassador Brown said we would raise the visit, but said our points focussed on Syrian compliance with UNSCR 1559 and Syrian interference in Lebanon. Viaux said Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel will visit Paris the day after Assad's visit to Vienna (i.e., March 16).

15. (C) The Assad visit has been on the agenda for years, Scheide told us. It has been postponed twice -- the last time at Syrian request at the time of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Austrians have what is for them a significant military presence in Syria, with some 300 troops participating in the peacekeeping mission in the Golan Heights.

16. (C) ACTION REQUEST: We would appreciate any additional points to convey to the Austrians regarding the March 15 visit.
Brown